DEUTSCHE AFRIKA-LINIEN
JOHN T. ESSBERGER

news

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Shipping in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

Adapting to working from home and strict safety rules/ Impact on the fleet and our seafarers/Economic consequences/ Decisions are taken daily/ Uncertainty about availability of South African ports

In Germany, the official Corona/Covid-19 period began on 27 March 2020. The government issued requirements for an official lockdown, which had a severe impact on private and public life. Our Group of Companies reacted immediately where measures had not been taken already. Apart from an emergency team in the office, all the staff were sent home and told to work in their "home office". For the crews on board our ships, it was the exact opposite in that they weren't allowed to leave their workplace on board anymore.

Since Germany has been comparatively successful in mastering the critical phase from a medical point of view, some safety requirements were rolled back step-by-step in June. We were therefore allowed to call 50% of the staff back to the office as of 8 June. Since then, the staff have been working in alternating groups. Whether and when the office will be fully staffed again is still unknown.

Do not underestimate the dangers of the Covid-19 virus

In all places of work, strict requirements still apply. Everyone must adhere to the social distancing rules, maintain strict hygiene, and most meetings are in the form of video conferences. There are hand sanitiser dispensers everywhere in the office, and there are signs on the doors that the lifts and restrooms may only be used by one person at a time. In the reception area, there are lists that everyone coming in has to fill in with their name and time of arrival. The same applies on our ships. As a result of the pandemic, the dress code has been down-scaled to allow business casual attire even on the top floor.

The fact that the dangers of the highly infectious Covid-19 virus must not be underestimated was made obvious by the local infection outbreaks as seen in several German meat packing plants at the end of June. By reinstating strict lockdowns, including all quarantine regulations, the authorities are trying to get the Covid-19 clusters back under control. Likewise hit hard are the crews of our ships. Their sailing schedules include ports in countries that are far worse affected by the pandemic, in particular the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Sweden. Countries currently also suffering severely are South Africa, especially Cape Town, and India.

Essberger Ship Management quickly supplied the ships with necessary personal protection equipment and issued guidelines on how to behave in such ports. For a healthy crew, the risk of

(continued on page 2)

Corona or not Corona: ships have regular docking times. Essberger Ship Management went ahead with "Amalie Essberger" in Denmark (page 3)

The world is trying to get the Covid-19 pandemic under control. Every aspect of life is impacted, and the shipping industry not spared. When the virus broke out, we reacted swiftly and kept operating in accordance with all safety requirements. The changes demanded considerable personal sacrifices from all of us.

The economic impact on our company is a painful setback. Despite signs that the worst might be over, we cannot rely simply on the hope that things will be better tomorrow. "Hope is the death of any salesman", as the saying goes. So, we will have to invest our full power to face this challenge by continuing to adapt our ways of working and our fleet.

To strengthen our results in the face of low chemical cargo volumes, we have removed tonnage from the market through the sale of two older tankers and laying up a further two smaller vessels. We continue with our newbuilding programme for Essberger Tankers, albeit at a slower pace. The continued bad results of our bulk carrier fleet have prompted us to sell one of our ships, the "Swakop".

In our liner trade, the South African service has been badly affected as a result of the crash in cargo volumes and restrictions imposed in Cape Town due to Covid-19. We are currently focusing on coordinating our sailing schedules, and preparing for the automobile industry in SA to resume production, whenever it will happen.

Covid-19 has been a major setback in our efforts to achieve acceptable results for our Group of Companies in 2020. I hope I can rely on your continued support and on your motivated and dedicated work. Above all: stay healthy!

Yours Eberhart von Rantzau

Old-school crossing-the-line ceremony on UAFL container ship "Ubena"

How Captain Konstantin Kveselevich keeps morale high on long trips across the Indian Ocean

To make it clear: these images were taken on board MV "Ubena" before the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The photo was supplied by master Konstantin Kveselevich and his crew during a crossing-the-line ceremony on the way from the Indian Ocean Islands to Karachi/Pakistan. The "Ubena" (2,265 TEU) sails for United Africa Feeder Line, a subsidiary of DAL. During the round trip the "Ubena" spends many days at sea and Captain Kveselevich always tries to boost the team spirit by organising social events such as a traditional line-crossing ceremony. Obviously with success as even the armed guard has a smile.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has terminated such events as they are not in line with social distancing. This picture reminds us of the fact that we are all human beings and socialising is also a vital part of our well-being.

On each Indian Ocean round trip, the container vessel "Ubena" crosses the line twice. The "Ubena" is part of the UAFL fleet connecting the Islands of the Indian Ocean with East Africa, Zanzibar, the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf. UAFL currently employs six multipurpose and container ships in various lines. The Middle East Express, relaunched in 2019, is the flagship service.

UAFL is known for being the best transit time from Jebel Ali/Dubai to the Seychelles and the most reliable service into Zanzibar, also for serving smaller outports. "Ubena" and her sistership "Ulanga", both built in 2016, are self-sustained container ships, owned by Essberger Dry Cargo and chartered by UAFL – members of the Deutsche Afrika-Linien/John T. Essberger Group of Companies.

Crossing wide parts of the Indian Ocean, the "Ubena" sails up to 14 days nonstop. Sure, there is always plenty of work to do on a big ship, but sometimes you need to take a break and look forward to an event that combines the crew and keeps everyone's spirits high. On board the "Ubena" they decided to organise and prepare for an old-school crossing-the-line-ceremony. Captain Konstantin Kveselevich writes: "We pay special attention to maintaining good morale and working and emotional climate on board. For your attention there are some pictures from several equator crossing baptismal ceremonies which I tried to conduct following old ocean rites." This includes a visit from Neptune along with his wife Amphitrite, their royal retinue and pirates before starting the baptismal ceremony. The rules of social distancing make events like this impossible now, so an old tradition might die out.

Visit of Neptune before the coronavirus terminated all such activities

Last splashing during their baptismal ritual. It will be dearly missed

Shipping in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

(continued from page 1)

becoming infected on board is low. This is proven by the numbers that came out at the end of June, with currently no known cases in the fleet. The main burden suffered by seafarers, especially by Filipinos, who comprise the majority of our crews, is mental stress. The lack of travel options and strict quarantine rules in Manila make it almost impossible to carry out any crew changes. As a result, many seafarers are "trapped" on board far longer than required by their contractual service term.

Owners sent personal updates to the staff on a weekly basis

The efforts made by the captains and officers to boost morale on board and to create distractions are described in this edition of DAL/JTE News. In personally released updates, Dr Eberhart von Rantzau and Heinrich von Rantzau informed the ships about the latest developments on a weekly basis. This expression of trust has been greatly praised by many captains and crews. Despite the extensive disruptions due to the travel restrictions, our Ship Management department managed to complete all the scheduled technical work: the planned docking of two tankers at the shipyard in Søby/Denmark, the sale of two older tankers to Russia, the warm lay-up of two smaller tankers in Odense/Denmark, and the takeover of the "Birthe Essberger" into Essberger management. The economic consequences of the pandemic for our company are explained by Dr Eberhart von Rantzau in his editorial on page 1.

In spite of Covid-19 lockdowns, Essberger Ship Management managed to go forward with the docking programme of the Essberger Tankers fleet. Here we can see our chemical tankers "Lisa Essberger" and "Amalie Essberger" at Søby Shipyard on the Danish Island of Aerø. Aerø is the most southern island of Denmark and was well secluded under the Danish lockdown. The island is rated a gem among the isles of the Danish "South Sea". During the 19th century Aerø's main port Marstal was home to a big sailing ship fleet. Seafaring is the heritage of Aerø. Want to read a maritime blockbuster about it? Read Carsten Jensen's epic novel: "We, the Drowned" ("Wir Ertrunkenen"). The image was supplied by Andreas Bendlin.

"We explored every possible means"

Strict lockdowns, especially in the Philippines, are the greatest obstacle to flying our seafarers home but motivation remains high

The crews on our ships have been hit especially hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. Delayed crew changes of up to eight weeks beyond the usual six-month service time are a huge burden, especially for our Filipino seafarers. André Trommler says:

"On the one hand, the risk of infection has to be eliminated or else the whole ship would have to be put into quarantine. On the other hand, we have to ensure that longer stays on board do not lead to exhaustion or even burnout, which could result in serious accidents on the vessel. Since the start of the crisis, we have sought every possible means to ensure that crew changes take place on time. But the strict lockdowns all over the world made this impossible. The Crewing department continued to explore every possibility, we even considered unusual options. When the Essberger tankers "Lucy" and "Eduard" were sold to Russian buyers, an agreement was made to hand over the ships in Kaliningrad. With the help of our Russian manning agency STAFF, the crews were taken by bus to neighbouring Latvia. From Riga we managed to fly them out on a regular flight. I think that was the first time ever that something like this was successful in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad".

Within the Schengen region (in Europe), it was less problematic for our Dutch and Polish crew members to return home, even though most of the borders were shut until mid-June. It was easiest for the Dutch, because the ships often call at Dutch ports. In order to repatriate our Polish seafarers to Szczecin we used Essberger company cars, equipped with sufficient disinfectant and face masks, of course. To transport seafarers from and to Ukraine, the government in Kiev got involved by providing charter flights, because there were no longer any regular flights. During the lockdown in Russia, we organised a taxi service for our seafarers to take them to Minsk in Belarus, where regular flights were still possible. Crew changes in the Mediterranean were impossible for a long time.

The crews on board the container ships "Ubena" and "Ulanga", in service for UAFL on the Indian Ocean, were likewise in a very unfortunate situation. Trommler: "The ships have such unfavourable sailing plans in that they only call at ports which don't allow any crew changes. such as India. Liner ships have nine-month contracts and are thus on board for three months longer than the tanker crews. Luckily, we were able to change most of the crews in the Indian Ocean in time, before the outbreak of the pandemic."

The biggest challenge is and remains changing Filipino crews, not only because they make up the biggest part of our seafarers. Manila had gone into a complete lockdown for a long period of time. There were neither international nor national flights. In Manila, seafarers coming in have to quarantine for 14 days. The accommodation designated for Filipino seafarers pose a high risk for infections. In Manila, the authorities even designated a cruise ship as quarantine accommodation!

Although the lockdown has now ended, the problem for the approx. 60,000 affected seafarers still on board worldwide is now a different bottleneck: before they are even allowed to leave the country, the seafarers first have to have their certificates extended, their visas renewed and get medical check-ups. However, since the official administrations and training centres in Manila are operating with only half their staff, while thousands of seafarers are flocking into the capital, the system is facing an enormous surge. Trommler says:

André Trommler is Head of the Crewing department of Essberger Ship Management

"Currently we can process 50 per cent of the people we want to fly out per week. The regular flights on offer are not enough to cope with the increased demand. In June, we therefore decided to use charter flights organised by shipowner Peter Döhle."

Crew changes are still the most pressing issue the Crewing department has to tackle. While other shipowners report of Covid-19 infections, strikes and mental problems on board, Essberger has so far been spared of this. Trommler says:

"We do all we can for our crews. The people on board know that. It's important to keep them up to date. Motivation is still high but we are very much aware of the burden on our seafarers, of course."

An insight report from the Covid-19 front by master of "Amalie Essberger"

Stories and picture from the crew of a chemical tanker at the early stages of the Covid-19 outbreak/ Protection material confiscated by customs/ Deserted ports/ Pilots unprotected/ By Captain Adam Incewicz

Adam Incewicz is master of the chemical tanker "Amalie Essberger" (8,518 dwt). In his report Captain Incewicz tells us what he and his crew experienced during the early stages of coronavirus lockdowns in various European ports. "I joined the "Amalie Essberger" on 31 January 2020 in the port of Algeciras, where we already heard about the coronavirus-19 disease. But all of us treated such news as something still far away from us. In the next days and weeks, it became evident that the company and crew must be prepared for the unknown enemy and do everything to survive the stormy time ahead.

Great care was taken by the company to support the ship's management: e-mails containing continuous updates regarding Covid-19 areas and ports and absolutely essential information on how to protect ourselves and all the crew – as well as several attempts to deliver protection material, which was, however, confiscated by customs.

Equipment such as very high-class protective coveralls, masks and googles were already on board all six vessels operating in the Med. Everything was kept in the refugee container and it was agreed with the company to use it.

Based on information received, a decontamination solution was prepared (70% ethanol) in order to use it on the bridge after manoeuvre operations and pilot disembarkation and the one appointed entrance for the whole crew who were on duty on deck. The bridge team was reduced to a minimum when the pilot was on board entering and leaving each port as well as on deck when external persons were present.

"Amalie Essberger" was the only vessel directed for loading and discharging at Spanish and Italian ports, especially in Porto Marghera near Venice known already as a main Covid-19 hotspot in Europe, being so close to Bergamo where it all started.

We were sailing between Algeciras – Livorno – Huelva – Porto Marghera and Augusta carrying out at the same time a number of external inspections – unbelievable! The first inspection in late February was a Port State Control in Immingham/England, where two inspectors boarded the vessel and kept us busy for several hours while completely unprotected at this time. The second inspection was a SIRE in the port of Algeciras in mid-March. This could be carried out based on guidelines received from the company and World Health Organisation (WHO) as well as information from TV news. So, the crew was well prepared, and the inspection could be carried out keeping the vessel permanently on the market.

It was quite a strange experience to keep a safe distance from the inspector in full coveralls and mask for several hours and at the same time being available and helpful. The third and fourth followed in the port of Augusta/Sicily on 22 April, where we passed pre-mooring inspection under anchor followed by a terminal inspection on the next day. Those inspectors were wearing only masks – at least something – while the crew was fully protected and distanced from them.

In order to summarise my prolonged time on board, let me say this: once the Covid-19 outbreak was announced, the Spanish people behaved adequately observing the new rules – arriving protected on board and all documents were exchanged on an e-mail basis, which worked perfectly. While in Livorno (north-western part of Italy), people behaved quite similar to the Spanish. Unfortunately, at Porto Marghera (Venice) on the Adriatic coast, people were completely careless, being unprotected and only some of them wearing masks/gloves. Most of the paperwork was done on board outside of accommodation in specially prepared areas on deck. We experienced the worst approach towards Covid-19 protection on the way from Maas pilot station towards Moerdijk. The pilot was completely unprotected while the captain was in full protection (suit/goggles/gloves) for several hours. The bridge had to be decontaminated three times afterwards, also we had to deal with the documents by hand – not by e-mail.

Saying this you can see the different approaches to safety issues in Europe, and how people cared – or did not care – about themselves and the crew. Having in mind the company and WHO guidelines supplied to the crew repeatedly before any port entrance, as well as an understanding of the pandemic impact, we managed to keep "Amelie Essberger" free of Covid-19 infections."

During loading operations in Porto Marghera/Venice, a coronavirus hotspot, only the crew member is protected

Captain Adam Incewicz

Full protection with overalls, gloves and masks during inspection

Chemical tanker "Amalie Essberger" employed in the Mediterranean to ports like Augusta/Sicily and Porto Marghera

Full protection overall

Alongside the jetty of Augusta/Sicily: full protection on deck of "Amalie Essberger"

Loading facilities, totally deserted

Sanitary gloves are a must for protection

Whereabouts

July 2020

Ships name	Master	First Mate	Chief Engineer
Agnes Essberger	Robert Waldon	Denis Vlasov	Piotr Popiel
Alcedo	Edgar Roelofsen	Albertus Konijn	Roel Tichelaar
Amalie Essberger	Piotr Bes	Marcin Madry	Adam Szwajka
Anneliese Essberger	Marco Boshuijzen	Gerben Bosscher	Pieter Pasterkamp
Annette Essberger	David Jones	Arkadiusz Duczynski	Artur Krupa
Ardea	Albert Ten Wolde	Els Impens	Arnoldus Eland
Birthe Essberger	Paulo Santos	Aleksandrs Lomovskis	Ruslans Lesciks
Caroline Essberger	Gerardus Wijnands	Pawel Pawlik	Teunis Oskam
Charlotte Essberger	Krzysztof Osuch	Ilja Baranovskis	Sergey Panishev
Christian Essberger	Robert Szmaj	Robert Halicki	Zoran Zambata
Dutch Aquamarine	Lien Jeanne Huyghe	Brian De Sterre Roberts	Jan Sonneveld
Dutch Emerald	Theo Keizer	Dominik Kazior	Ronald De Bruin
Dutch Faith	Sander De Bos	Ernst Hendrik Jan Weijde	Jelle Spoelstra
Dutch Spirit	Alex Buren	Sjoerd Rijndorp	Marinus Kroon
Ellen Essberger	Mariusz Borek	Valeriy Dorofeev	Artem Glushko
Elsa Essberger	Stefan Grabowski	Marcin Harasim	Lukasz Zeromski
Georg Essberger	Jacek Borysiuk	Piotr Adamski	Guilherme Bacelar
Gisela Essberger	Ali Ayara	Rafal Garbacz	Marek Ptasznik
Helga Essberger	Waldemar Literski	Jaroslaw Krok	Olegs Cerepanovs
Johann Essberger	Andrei Malenkov	Juris Jurionas	Oleg Byts
John Augustus Essberger	Jaroslaw Spors	Evgeniy Buzyrev	Saturnino Yuson
Liesel Essberger	Antonio Petinga	Damian Rechnio	Leonid Volkov
Lisa Essberger	Leonardus Kanters	Willem Schot	Johan Neutel
Maersk Launceston	Mariusz Pleskacz	Dmytro Stygar	Oleksandr Niskovsky
Patricia Essberger	Maciej Kaminski	Deniss Andrejevs	Miroslaw Jaworski
Philipp Essberger	Deniss Tatarinovs	Tomasz Rembisz	Piotr Trusinski
Theodor Essberger	Bartosz Selau	Blazej Czapiewski	Ryszard Topolewski
Ubena	Konstantin Kveselevich	Angie Mae Cagud	Dony Merwoto
Ulanga	I.C. Cioban	Marcelo Borbon	Costica Tuca
Ursula Essberger	Cornelis Lodder	Rik Bolwijn	Ronald Van Herwijnen
Wilhelmine Essberger	Peter Troost	Marcin Szajdecki	Niels Zeinstra

Aus der Reederei-Familie

Jubiläen

40 Jahre

Hendrik Van Schoonhoven, *C/E*, 30.08.1980

25 Jahre

J.A. Cancela dos Santos, *AB*, 08.06.1995
Jenesis Isabelo Caballes, *CCK*, 15.06.1995
Ricardo Dumangcas Tubal, *AB*, 16.06.1995
Cornelio Sangco Villaflor, *CCK*, 16.06.1995
Inga Ellerbrock, *DAL*, 01.08.1995
Edgar Dumagat Sanisit, *AB*, 30.08.1995

10 Jahre

Kirsten Michaelis, *DAL*, 01.06.2010
Wilson III Crisanto Quibuyen, *3/E*, 08.06.2010
Boguslaw Tarasiuk, *Electrician*, 16.06.2010
Lynn Krumtünger, *DALSA*, 01.08.2010

Besondere Geburtstage

85 Jahre

Peter Lange, 08.06.1935

80 Jahre

Hans-Jörg Hering, 06.06.1940
Hans Stapelfeldt, 06.07.1940
Uta Bou-Chedid, 30.07.1940

70 Jahre

Guilherme Frederico Bacelar, *C/E*, 27.07.1950
John Putter, 26.08.1950

65 Jahre

Capt. Jose Eduardo Teixeira, 17.06.1955

60 Jahre

Niall Mushet, *JTE*, 25.05.1960
Marcelino Vergara Macalindong, *CCK*, 02.06.1960
Pedrito Pullan Monsalud, *CCK*, 29.06.1960
Daniel Reyes De Ocampo, *PMP*, 21.07.1960
Ute Reineke, *DAL*, 27.07.1960
Capt. Antonio Jose Petinga, 28.07.1960
Capt. Krzysztof Niedzielski, 31.07.1960
Capt. Hubertus Floris Meulenberg, 17.08.1960

50 Jahre

Michèle Möller, *DSA*, 04.05.1970
Jenesis Isabelo Caballes, *CCK*, 20.07.1970
Britta Borsdorff, *DAL*, 15.08.1970
Krzysztof Kaja, *2/O*, 16.08.1970

Neue Mitarbeiter an Land

Adrian Beer, *Accounting*
Nicole Benecke, *Liner Accounting*
Reda Hamreras, *Ship Management*
Dr. Andreas Freier, *Controlling & Organisation*
Andrejs Kopins, *Ship Management*
Ole-Christian Krenczak, *MTI*
Isabelle Marie Nüsse, *Ship Management*
Hanna Schmöker, *Controlling*
Melek Tasgin, *HR Shore*
Leonie Streitferdt, *Ops Liner Services*
Ben-Lukas Weber, *Essberger Tankers*

Ausgelernte Auszubildende an Land

Adrian Beer, *DAL*
Leonie Streitferdt, *DAL*
Ben-Lukas Weber, *JTE*

Wir gratulieren zur Geburt eines Kindes

Svenja Behnke, Sohn Jonas, 07.04.2020

Geheiratet haben

Katharina Deutscher, geb. Mallock, *DAL*
Kalina Máté, *DSA Stuttgart*

Wir gedenken

Frau Renate Kühn (87), April 2020, ehemals JTE

Vito von Rantzau– born 4 May in Mapou

Happy news for the von Rantzau Family. On 4 May 2020, a son was born to Christian Albrecht von Rantzau and his wife Nofretete (née Gaillard) in the Wellkins Hospital on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. His full name is Vito Vincent Laurent von Rantzau. As the father says, Vito (from Vitus, "the vivid") seems to be the appropriate name for the young man. The second surname Laurent is a reference to his grandfather Laurent Gaillard.

Christian Albrecht von Rantzau is the son of DAL/JTE Managing Co-Owner Heinrich von Rantzau and his wife Annette, and he currently works as a Trade Manager with United Africa Feeder Line (UAFL) based in Mapou.

Vito was born at the height of Mauritius' coronavirus lockdown, but fortunately the family is well. Meanwhile things have eased down and in mid-June shops, restaurants and bars on the island reopened again. There are currently only five cases of Covid-19 known and kept in quarantine. The local economy though is suffering from a total lockdown of the airport, while national carrier Air Mauritius is under voluntary administration. Subsequently all hotels are still closed.

Vito - two months old. Sweet dreams!

Social distancing: if a German seagull can do it – so can you!

A new beginning for our trainees

The DAL/JTE head office in Hamburg is still working in Covid-19 mode. Fifty per cent of the staff are back in the office, 50 per cent are working from home. Although coronavirus infections in Hamburg are down to single digits – quite an achievement for city of 1.9 million inhabitants – there is no end in sight for the restrictions. Meetings are still held via video conference, and social distancing is taken seriously. This can be seen at the Essberger desk on the fourth floor, the centre of all Essberger Tankers' activities. In the west wing of the office we see a crew of four, namely Timon Spreckels, Hannah Gau, Malte Ringer and Tiberius Schütze (photo below, from left to right). Except for Hannah Gau (she works as a student on a special programme) they are three of our currently 15 trainees who suffered under the adverse conditions of working from home, unable to look over the shoulder of their more experienced colleagues. The good news: they are all back in the office and looking forward to resuming their apprenticeship.

Essberger Tankers' west-wing office on Palmaille resumed working – a little bit

Thanks

A collection of quotes received from abroad

"Together, we can move the world in more ways than one."
Liezl U Bautista (Crewing Department, TOS Manila)

"Many thanks for all the efforts you all made to get the crew home and on board safely in this hard corona-virus time. We wish you all good health and luck. Theses wishes are on behalf of everyone here on board!"
Capt. A.C.J Nagel ("Lucy Essberger")

"And I would also like to thank you and all of the Crewing department for the good arrangements you make. Even in this difficult time! Hopefully the Filipino crew can also enjoy some time off in the future."
Capt. Bas van Groenstijn ("Caroline Essberger")

"Via this e-mail, the captain and crew would like to thank you all for all efforts made regarding crew changes and all private matters solved during these difficult Covid times. So THANKS and stay safe."
Capt. J. ten Wolde & crew ("Alcedo")

"All the crew on board Lisa Essberger appreciate your enormous effort to find solutions for relieving all seafarers in time. Due to present circumstances, which all seafarers understand, it will be a big challenge for all of you to bring good news to all personnel on board the ships and the families at home. We all give you a warm and loud applause, and let's hope that the seafarers can soon be relieved at all ports in the world. THANK YOU!!!"
Crew of "Lisa Essberger"

For more information on the **DAL/JTE Group** please contact Svante Domizlaff, tel: +49 40 38016-611, email: svante.domizlaff@rantzau.de or the German head office
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John T Essberger Palmaille 45, 22767 Hamburg, tel: +49 40 38016-0, fax: +49 40 38016-579, email: chartering@essberger.biz

"Our IT infrastructure was ready"

An interview with Erich-André Beckmann and Athos Buchheister from our in-house IT department

Our dependence on digital communication in our working lives has become even more evident in the Covid-19 pandemic. Without well-functioning IT, no home office, no meetings, no contact to our agencies, to our ships or to our customers would be possible. DAL/JTE News spoke to Erich-André Beckmann and Athos Buchheister, the Head of Corporate IT and his deputy.

Athos Buchheister, IT department deputy, with his colleague Eugen Chlebnikov in the company's underground service room

DAL/JTE NEWS: The Corona/Covid-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down. At the start of the lockdown and the home office period in March 2020, our internal and external corporate communication wholly depended on our IT department. Were you prepared for such a catastrophe?

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: For access to our company applications and data outside of the corporate network, i.e. when working remotely, we have already been using software from Citrix for the last ten years. Initially, Citrix was mainly used by Essberger Ship Management because they have many members of staff who are always travelling. Back then, Citrix was also generally available to all our other employees and its number of users increased over the years. For example, our inland agencies and crewing in Poland are connected to our central servers in Hamburg via Citrix. Citrix is also used in-house to access dedicated applications of our Ship Management, Crewing and other departments. In Citrix we have found a relatively stable, reliable solution and acquired the relevant expertise. Thanks to this, among other things, we were fairly well prepared when the Covid-19 pandemic started.

DAL/JTE NEWS: However, the emergency started very suddenly. Did you have sufficient time to adapt to the extraordinary challenge?

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: We had hardly any time to prepare. At most, it was about a week. Switching to the staff working from home hit us almost from one day to the next. The number of employees accessing Citrix jumped from about 60 to more than 200 in just a couple of days. Our servers were not designed for such a large number of users. In order to ensure that the necessary performance was maintained, we increased our server capacity by an additional 12 servers in just three days. Another huge challenge was dealing with the many requests for additional hardware from people working from home. At first, we were able meet the demand from our stockpile. But these devices were only sufficient for Citrix. Within a week we were able to provide 15 devices. With that, we had created the technical infrastructure for the home office of all our staff in a minimum space of time. So, we installed a Skype for Business platform from Microsoft, a tried and tested solution for speech and video communication. We "took the plunge" and ultimately succeeded without any major problems. Such a fast switchover was by no means easy, since we only had a team of six to set up a communication network for so many users. In addition, not only the users but we too had to get accustomed to the new situation. We had many questions coming in. Don't forget, the IT department itself was working from home and had to provide support from within their own four walls. In the past four months we haven't had a single company-critical incident. We also want to take this opportunity to praise our users who have, on the whole, been very understanding and cooperative. After all, we can only master such a situation if we work together.

DAL/JTE NEWS: After the alarm phase comes handling the backlog.

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: That's right. Now, security was the main priority. In the age of cyberattacks and data protection laws, it's essential to make sure the necessary measures are taken. Working on a private PC is out of the question. On our recommendation, the management decided to only use company-own equipment and thus enable a standardisation in the context of working remotely, on the go and in the employees' home offices. On the basis of a survey we had carried out, we first ordered 40 notebooks and various equipment. This was then successively distributed to the relevant users. As an additional safety precaution, we also encrypted the local hard disks of all our company computers. We thus fulfilled the necessary technical requirements for working securely and then defined an organisational framework, i.e. a relevant policy as to how working remotely and working from home was to look like.

DAL/JTE NEWS: Did you ever encounter any difficulties with transmission speeds or anything to do with the Internet connection? Was the Web ever overloaded?

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: Applications such as our email system and Skype for Business are cloud-based, meaning they run in the computer centres at Microsoft. During the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all companies worldwide who didn't have these services switched to them then. The providers struggled to cope at first and had to adapt their IT infrastructure to meet the higher loads, just like we did with Citrix. Of course, it's normal that their servers sometimes reached their limits when the volume of data was suddenly ten times as high, and so these applications sometimes caused delays or crashes. Our IT infrastructure was already in good shape before the pandemic.

DAL/JTE NEWS: Everyone is talking about cloud services. How can we use these services in future?

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER:. We use the email service and Skype for Business as an integral part of our cloud-based Microsoft Office365 platform. This type of IT services has meanwhile matured and become very reliable. In future, we will use Office 365 as a strategic platform for all Microsoft services, and it will offer us even more flexibility because access to data and Microsoft applications will be possible everywhere via a Web browser and also via apps on your smartphone. Moreover, it will facilitate cooperation within and outside of the company. Initially, we wanted to start as early as March to successively introduce additional services such as Office for the Web and SharePoint Online to various departments within the company. As a result of Covid-19 we had to change our priorities, but we're tackling that again now. Our focus is also on MS Teams.

DAL/JTE NEWS: Has the staff returned to the office now?

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: Like all the other departments in the company, half of our team has been back at the office since 15 June and the other half is still working from home. We switch who works where every week.

DAL/JTE NEWS: Generally speaking, the pandemic has had a positive effect on the progress of digitalisation.

BECKMANN/BUCHHEISTER: Yes, the speed of digitalisation has picked up. The willingness to adapt to digital technology has increased, but we must make sure we don't go too fast. Too much haste entails risks. Good planning and a steady introduction are the basis for success. Our existing and future investments in digital application and communication structures are well placed, not wasting a single euro. There is an increasing awareness how urgently we need digitalisation. Anyone who wants to remain on the market has to face the situation quickly and, above all, sustainability.